

Keep On Going
Luke 13:31-35
March 4, 2007
Kory Wilcoxson

We all probably remember our first love, but do you remember your first rejection? Pamela Tillman. It still hurts. We were in kindergarten together. I liked her because she shared her glue with me. Our love was more of an unspoken one, but I was pretty convinced that she had the hots for me, mainly because I had the latest Smurfs lunchbox. Girls really dug that kind of stuff.

The rejection came on, of all the days, Valentine's Day. My own version of the Valentine's Day Massacre. For Pamela, I had picked out a Scooby Doo valentine because it had the most hearts on it. Surely she'd get the message, right? When we exchanged Valentines at school, the one she gave me was some generic 101 Dalmatians valentine with some vague expression of admiration like "You're the top dog!" But then I noticed the one she gave to Lance, who sat next to me. It said "hugs and kisses" on it! Why didn't I get the one that said "hugs and kisses"? It sounds silly now, but at the time I was absolutely heartbroken.

You remember how it feels to have your heart broken? It's not a place in our memory we like to dwell, is it? Nothing hurts so much as to go to someone and offer love – in my case, in the form of a Scooby Doo valentine – and have that offer rejected. It physically hurts. It makes you sick to your stomach. Do you remember that feeling of being rejected? Of being told, "You're not good enough?" Of being told, "We don't want you?" Do you remember that feeling?

Now you have an idea of what Jesus is feeling in our passage today. It's not often in the gospels that we get a glimpse inside Jesus' mind, to hear his thoughts and feel his emotions. This is Jesus at his most human, and we can almost hear the anguish in his cry of, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem." Sounds a bit like my cry walking home from school: "O Pamela, Pamela." It's the cry of one who's given his whole heart, only to have it broken.

Not that Jesus should be surprised. Many of his attempts to reach out were spurned in one way or another, including by the religious leaders of the day. Which makes the Pharisees' warning in this passage so peculiar. So many times in the gospels that have been at odds with Jesus, trying to trap him or provoke him into conflict. They will play an instrumental role in his arrest. And yet, here they are, warning Jesus about the danger he faces and offering some unsolicited advice.

Were the Pharisees genuinely concerned about Jesus' well-being, or did they just want him off their street corner? Their exhortation to "leave this place and go somewhere" carries with it the implied statement, "we don't want you here." To be looking out for his welfare would be totally out of character. But there is a kernel of truth to their warning. Herod DID want to kill Jesus, and will eventually play a role in making that happen during Holy Week. Herod was already responsible for the beheading of John the Baptist, and now was turning his attention to the latest rabble-rouser, this Jesus character.

Although Herod's title was "king," he was hardly a respected leader. Everyone knew Herod's only claim to royalty was because the Romans promoted him to rule over a remote outpost in order to get in good with his father, who was basically a very powerful thug. Herod's power is not real power, even though he claims it as such.

Of course, Jesus sees right through it, calling him a “fox,” which means he’s cunning, sly, and destructive. Jesus isn’t about to back off his divine call just because it’s dangerous. Poet Robert Frost once wrote, “The best way out is always through.” Perseverance was a hallmark of Jesus’ ministry. In the face of evil and challenges and plain old human stubbornness, he pressed on today, tomorrow, and the next day.

After reasserting his destiny and mission, we get this aside from Jesus about Jerusalem, which was the central location of the Temple and God’s people. He uses this interesting metaphor to articulate his heartfelt desire: “How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.”

We may not immediately picture Jesus as a mother hen, but that metaphor has ample precedence in scripture. God’s protection is often associated with the protection of a mother bird. Psalm 17 says, “Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings from the wicked who assail me, from my mortal enemies who surround me.” And Psalm 61 says, “Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the foe. I long to dwell in your tent forever and take refuge in the shelter of your wings.”

I remember reading a story about a fire at a farmhouse. Once the fire was out, the firemen began the process of cleaning up around the grounds. As they were doing that, they heard a small peeping noise by the barn. When they investigated, they found a dead hen, scorched and blackened – with three live chicks hidden under her wings. God’s protection is like that of a mother hen sheltering her children from danger.

In a sense, what Jesus has done is paint a different picture of leadership than the one we were just given a few verses before. It’s basically the difference between foxes and hens. Foxes rule their turf through violence, aggression, and bloodshed, while hens offer no defense other than sacrificing themselves on behalf of their chicks. Jesus had disciples; Herod had soldiers. Jesus serves; Herod rules. Jesus prays for his enemies; Herod kills his. In a contest between the two, who would you bet on?

This image of God as a mother hen is fine in terms of comfort, but doesn’t quite work when it comes to protection. I concur with preacher Barbara Brown Taylor when she says she’d rather have Clint Eastwood protecting her. In the movie “Pale Rider,” Eastwood plays a frontier preacher with a secretive past. In one scene, as he prepares to face the foxes that have overrun his town, his past is revealed when he opens up a safety deposit box, takes off his clerical collar, and grabs a pair of six-shooters and a belt full of bullets.

That’s the kind of protection the Israelites wanted from Jesus. They didn’t want a suffering messiah; they wanted a messiah who would kick tail and take names, a vanquishing messiah who would come into Jerusalem with his six-shooters blazing, ridding their beloved city of all the Roman foxes who had overrun it.

That may explain why they rejected Jesus. They wanted the aggressiveness of a fox, while he was offering the commitment of a mother hen. They didn’t understand the power of the sacrifice Christ was going to make for them. The city had a reputation for not understanding God’s message. As Jesus notes, prophet after prophet had been run out of the city. And now, their house is left desolate. That’s what happens when you repeatedly ask God to go away; you get what you wish for.

But Jesus will come again, to Jerusalem and to us, on Palm Sunday, when it will be proclaimed, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" We will once again have a chance to welcome Christ and the protection he offers from all that this world throws at us.

This protection doesn't mean we still won't have to face the foxes. Remember, the only way out is through. But what it means is that we won't stand alone as life bombards us with disease and death and deception and disappointment. When Herod and his bullies came after Jesus, he didn't put down his pitcher and bowl and pick up a rifle. He just put himself between them and his children. We have this big, fluffed up, brooding hen, offering warmth and shelter and companionship, planting herself between the foxes of this world and us fragile chicks, offering herself up as a sacrifice in our place.

The amazing thing about this protection is that there is room for all of us. Our mother hen doesn't discriminate and exclude. Look around here! Right now, under the protection of God's wings, I see some orphans, some runts, even a couple ducks. There is room enough for all of us in here, and there is no limit to the love and protection Christ offers us: "I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day."

We can face the foxes alone. We can whip out our six-shooters and try to outgun them. We can rely on our own strength and cunning and bravery. But in the end, it won't be enough, will it? Through the cross, Christ offers us forgiveness and love and protection. Of course, we don't have to take it. But I wonder what will become of the young if they don't accept the shelter of their mother's wings? As we keep going today, and tomorrow, and the next day, we keep in front of us the divine goal of a life lived in the presence and praise of Jesus Christ. With Christ as our guide and guardian, we will make it out by making it through.